Cemetery chapel dedicated after restoration

By GREG SACKVITCH
Daily News Reporter

Fifty years after it was built, the tiny chapel at Olathe Cemetery has been rediscovered and restored in the hope that it may some day be used for some sort of church service.

In ceremonies Saturday, Phil Mapes, Olathe City Council member, unveiled a plaque honoring the Olathe Lions Club for its work in restoring the chapel, which has never been used.

The chapel was built as a WPA project about 1935, during the Great Depression. During those bleak times, the city of Olathe donated limestone rocks so that unemployed men could be put to work in the government project.

Those workersmade quick work of the 30-foot square chapel, constructing it at the southwest entrance of the cemetery, between Chestnut Street and the World War I Memorial.

City officials wanted the chapel used for gravestone services, and possibly to hold coffins until weather allowed them to be buried.

"I guess that's why it was built, but I guess the families didn't want to leave the bodies out there by themselves," said the sexton of the cemetery, Phil Simpson. "They built two shelves so they could have room for two caskets, but they were never used, according to everyone I've talked to."

And so the chapel was not used for years, then was later used as a restroom and to store gardening equipment for the cemetery.

"I hated that," Simpson said. "It has always been a favorite spot of mine."

And so Simpson went to work, seeking help in restoring the old chapel. He quickly found two allies in Marlene Nettol, of the Olathe Parks and Recreation Department, and Lee Shriver, of the Lions Club.

"I've always been interested in history, and I wondered about this," Shriver said. "I didn't know much about it, except that it was an eyesore."

And so Shriver talked the Lions Club into restoring the building, and Nettol talked the city into helping.

The Lions Club set aside $1,000 for the project, and eventually spent $200, Shriver said. Members donated their labor to get the building and begin the restoration.

Some students even pitched in.

After touring the cemetery last school year, Maureen McNairney, Olathe's fourth-grade student at Washington Elementary School, staged a bake sale, raising $50 for the project.

"We just took everything out," Shriver said of work at the chapel. "We filled two dump trucks. We took the restrooms out, and decided not to try to fix them. They may have been used at one time, but it's been awhile.

The city chipped in by replac ing the roof, running an electrical line to the building, and landscaping the area, plantin g shrubs.

The project was almost finish ed in May, but vandals kicked in the doors to the chapel, delaying the grand reopening.

"I hoped we'd have it before Memorial Day, but..." Shriver said. "I just hope they put it to use."

Simpson echoed those feelings.

"I'd love to start using it for services in the winter," she said. "I'd like to show it to kids in the tour. I just hope it will work."